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Building capabilities and territorial resources in mountain tourist areas

Case study in Oisans

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Translation: Brian Keogh

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- 1 Aside from the attraction for winter sports, reference to mountains has a central role in the tourism development of resorts. What the mountains conjure up is wide ranging, and includes not only the natural heritage, but also a cultural, historic and culinary heritage. The slogan “Mountains – you can’t beat them!” born of a joint publicity campaign put in place by the French Tourist Board and mountain leisure professionals in the 1990s has remained in people’s memories. Tourism projects have used this slogan in a great variety of ways. From pictures of little mountain chalets to images of snow and sports, the mountains have been portrayed in a vast number of ways. Alongside these different types of communication, tourism itself, seen as a valuable regional development tool, has evolved considerably in the French mountain areas. Changes in tourism demand and well as climate change (Richard *et al.*, 2010) have led to a new approach to tourism projects.
- 2 In this context, the Oisans region in the Alps provides a particularly rich area for research. In fact, the land use in this part of the Alps has long been “generic”. It has not been necessary to use territorial resources, in the location-specific sense of the term, to attract skiers, especially in the two international resorts of Alpe d’Huez and Les Deux Alpes. However, with today’s increasing competition, stakeholders have been forced to re-examine their strategies, as demonstrated by the inauguration in 2011 of the “route

des savoir-faire”. The main idea is to develop strategies that will ease the area’s strong reliance on mass tourism. The challenge is to identify resources that this “generic” mountain region can use to create other more specific tourism facilities. Our hypothesis is that these resources are essentially social and cultural, once the natural resources (snow cover, available area, gradient of slopes) are in place.

- 3 To support our hypothesis, we use an analytical framework combining regional economics and an approach based on capabilities. This original analysis enables us to show that the creation of tourism projects in mountain areas acts as a vector for developing specific capabilities. These capabilities can then be used to reinforce the tourism project. It is this virtuous circle that we are aiming to highlight in the Oisans.

Oisans, generic Alpine tourism that has changed the area: structure of living together and collective capabilities

- 4 In this section, we shall focus on the factors that can be used by resorts to help them meet the need to develop their tourism services. Geographical and economic literature offers ideas regarding the notion of resources. Furthermore, analysis of development dynamics has recently started to use a new tool that has emerged from discussion on theories of justice: capabilities. In this first paragraph, after defining these notions, we will show how tourism is a vector for building territorial capabilities in general, and more specifically in Oisans.

From generic resource to territorial capability: an economic perspective

- 5 Approaches in terms of resources provide ways of examining the role of territory, the challenges of its construction and its development. This point is the first step in understanding the conditions for renewing tourism services in mountain resorts.
- 6 Colletis and Pecqueur (1993) identify different types of resources available to a territory, from generic to specific. A generic resource is easily relocatable, as in the case for example of a raw material or an unskilled labour force. Specific resources on the other hand are linked to stakeholders. They involve pooling the skills of different stakeholders in the territory to solve an unprecedented production problem and during this process the specific resource is activated. Specific resources are created through the interaction of stakeholders, and exist only because of them. After the specific resource, the notion of the territorial resource emerges, defined as a “characteristic created from a specific territory with development as its purpose” (Gumuchian, Pecqueur, 2007, p. 5). For Corrado (2004), the territorial resource is latent, and owes its discovery and exploitation to an interpretation from some of the individuals making up society. A territorial resource results from coordination by stakeholders concerning a particular subject (history, myth, identity, common value...) (Lamara, 2009). The challenge for a territory is therefore to identify specific resources and to build and give value to territorial resources. These resources will enable a territory to initiate a development process. This links up with the analyses developed by Raffestin (1980), who shows that it is indeed when stakeholders suffuse a space with their intentions and actions that this space

becomes a territory. A territorial resource thus results from the intentionality of stakeholders and their desire to take action.

- 7 The question therefore is how the stakeholders can reveal resources and use and develop them in a tourism project. An answer to this can be found in the notion of territorial capabilities. Freedom is at the centre of the theoretical construction of the capability approach. For Sen (1999), the freedom that people have to lead the life that they have reasons to value must be at the heart of development analysis. In this context, capabilities are defined as all of the real freedoms enjoyed by individuals. They represent all the opportunities that are available to individuals (Alkire, 2005). The capability approach has today been re-examined by researchers interested in the collective aspect of capabilities (Dubois *et al.*, 2008). Collective capabilities are capabilities that are only present as a result of a collective action process, and it is the community as a whole that benefits from the new capabilities that are generated (Ibrahim, 2006).
- 8 There are two dimensions to collective capabilities: the structures of living together and collective action. On the one hand, capabilities will be built through the structures that form the individual's living environment: local economic conditions, infrastructures or even the history and culture of society. On the other hand, action by a group of individuals makes available capabilities that each person alone would not be able to mobilise. At this point it is possible to propose a "territorial" vision of these collective capabilities. Territory, a structure of living together and also a basis for collective action, will give individuals access to capabilities related to their involvement in the territory. Territory can first of all be defined as a structure of living together: it is made up of history and a common culture. Next, it acts as a basis for collective action. And it is on this action by a group of stakeholders involving themselves in production or in a project that territory is built, enabling territorial resources to be revealed and developed. Thus, a dialectic is created between the capabilities and the territorial resources in a territory. To reveal the resources of a territory it is necessary to mobilise the capabilities available at this level. In response to this mobilisation, the development of these territorial resources contributes to the emergence of capabilities in the territory. In this dynamic process, the tourism sector plays a fundamental role in the development of tourist destinations by acting as a vector for building territorial capabilities.

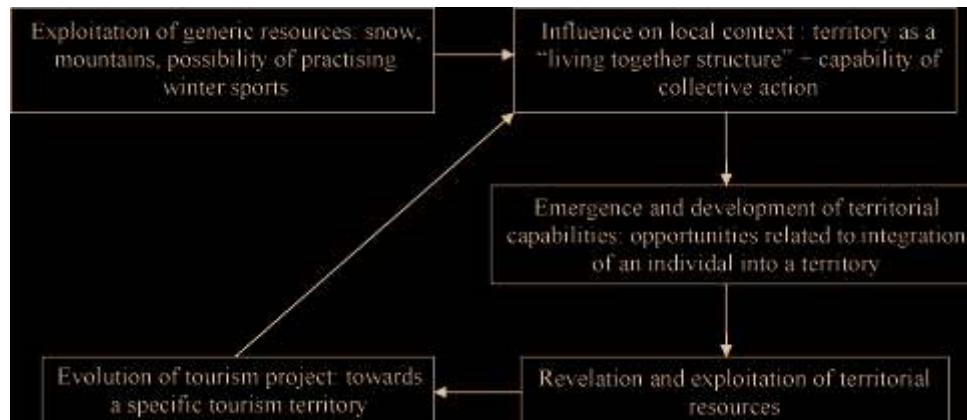
Mountain tourism as a vector for building territorial capabilities

- 9 Here, we shall look at mountain areas in the Alps, which have seen considerable tourism development and been subjected to what may be described as mass tourism. The municipalities that fall under the Oisans administrative area in southern Isère provide a good example to illustrate our observation. This territory is situated in the heart of the Alps and has a population of close to 10,000. Its economy is focussed on the tertiary sector (because of its highly developed tourism services) but Oisans also has its industries, in particular hydroelectricity. Oisans is a very developed tourist area but lacks specificity, making it an interesting territory for conducting our research. It is also full of contrasts, with major international ski resorts and small isolated localities. In addition, tourism has had significant crowding out effects in this territory (Bensahel, Donsimoni, 2001), with farming all but disappearing. Unlike the tourist destinations in Savoie and Haute-Savoie that offer specific products, or areas such as Les Baronnies that offer a "basket of goods and services" (Pecqueur, 2001), Oisans has work to do to create specific services.

Nevertheless, stakeholders in the territory do not hesitate to mention their assets linked to tourism, such as the adaptability of the work force and the area's long tradition of hospitality.

- 10 First of all, there is a strong dialectic between tourism and territory. The territory gives tourism the resources it needs in order to further develop. It does not matter what kind of resources are involved. Tourism draws on the characteristics (even generic ones) of a place in order to develop (Mollard *et al.*, 2006). Tourism is thus a special sector of activity, in the sense that it is firmly embedded in the territory and has numerous impacts on the destination area. These two particular features mean that, above and beyond tourism, it is the tourist project itself that generates development in a territory. On the other hand, tourism helps give the territory its specific nature, by highlighting its assets and making it attractive. There is a missing link in this reasoning, and that is capabilities, in other words the way in which territorial resources are revealed and utilised. Applying the interpretative framework for capabilities to the link between tourism and territory provides us with new avenues for analysis.
- 11 Tourism in fact develops two dimensions of territory that come into play in the process of building collective capabilities. Tourism has a role in the territory it influences as a "structure of living together": it affects the culture of the territory, the skills of the people who live there and the social bonds that are created within it. But it also acts as a vector for collective action in the territory. In fact, tourism develops a collective dimension of capabilities through the need to mobilise all the business sectors in the territory. Finally, a dialogue is created in the territory, as illustrated by Figure 1.

Figure 1.



- 12 It is this mechanism that can be observed in the Oisans territory. The method, based on conventional methods for applying the capability approach, involved surveying thirty stakeholders in the territory, from a variety of categories (local elected representatives, tourism stakeholders, economic players, project leaders, social sector representatives, associations). The survey, based on a semi-directive questionnaire, was designed to determine, from the responses of those surveyed, the level of the territory's capabilities as well as the link between this level and the development of tourism activities. It was thus the subjective aspect of capabilities that was sought.
- 13 Analysis of the strengths and weaknesses described by the stakeholders revealed the key role of tourism in the dynamics of the territory. In their vision, territorial development and tourism development are intrinsically linked. The negative aspect of tourism

development, such as the strong dependence of the local economy on this sector, did not emerge in the responses. Thus, tourism is perceived as a lifesaver for the territory, offsetting its negative aspects. The two main assets identified for Oisans are its geographic situation and its natural resources, followed by the dynamism of its stakeholders. All of the stakeholders surveyed pointed out that the economy of Oisans is founded on its natural resources, corresponding to generic resources: we find the same characteristics only in other mountain territories. It is the commitment and determination of local stakeholders, using these generic resources, that has enabled tourism to develop. This is the aspect of “collective action” that enables tourism projects to be put in place.

- 14 Thus, as confirmed by the mayor, Oisans is a territory where everything is based on tourism, so that in order to be dynamic, every effort must be made to develop this sector. Stakeholders in all the categories emphasised that in the Oisans area all business sectors are linked to tourism development: one local councillor said that “tourism is a big consumer of services” while a project leader stated that “administrative services are needed to organise tourism services”. A whole network comprised of elected representatives, economic players and local development stakeholders is being created around tourism; it is the collective action capability of the territory that is developed thanks to mass tourism. At the same time, tourism creates links not only within the territory but also outside it, for example with respect to the Rhône-Alpes Development Contract (CDRA) for Alpes Sud Isère. These links along with the culture of working together are of particular value when it comes to creating other projects.
- 15 Next, tourism creates identity in a territory. Private and public stakeholders share the territory’s “tourism” and “mountain” identity, as witnessed by business logos that refer to the Oisans territory. Furthermore, the stakeholders whom we met recognised this identity, not seeing Oisans as a mountain territory like any other, a situation that invites local stakeholders to think about its resources, its borders, and its very make-up. Tourism development calls on people to really examine the territory, to define it, and ultimately to better understand its challenges. This is demonstrated by some of the statements made by stakeholders during the survey in Oisans: a project manager pointed out that “it is for tourism that cooperation started. Before, everyone worked in isolation. Tourism has made people work together (translation)”. What emerges from the comments of stakeholders in Oisans is that tourism works on two levels: first, the creation of a territorial identity (territory as a structure of living together) and second, the social links in the territory (territory as a basis for collective action). The example of Oisans shows that with so-called generic resources as a starting point, tourism has influenced the very structure of the territory, putting in place conditions for building territorial capabilities. At this stage in the analysis, two particular aspects should be examined. First, the nature of these territorial capabilities, and second the identification of capabilities that enable territorial resources to be revealed and utilised, leading to renewal of the territory’s tourism services or tourism “product”.

Specification of tourism services in Oisans: the virtuous circle of resources and capabilities

- 16 The field study conducted in Oisans provides us with a picture of how mountain tourism services have developed in terms of capabilities. The interviews with stakeholders in the

area provide insight into the mechanism whereby collective capabilities built thanks to the use of territorial resources enable services to be developed that call increasingly on a more territorial use of resources. Thus, at the level of mountain tourism territories, the question to be addressed concerns those capabilities that are built through tourism activities in general. The next stage is to identify those that can be used as a means of highlighting and developing territorial resources, leading to a shift from mass tourism to more specific tourism services.

Territorial capabilities in Oisans

- 17 On the basis of a review of the literature on the subject of capabilities, tourist areas and territorial development, as well as through contacts made with other researchers, we identified seven territorial capabilities that can be considered important in the development of mountain tourism areas: social capital, human capital, income level, access to employment, access to services, access to housing and the local economic fabric. Each of these capabilities represents different facets of the opportunities available in a tourist area to those who live there. However, it is the collective dimension of these capabilities that is an asset when renewing mountain tourism services. The question is to identify those capabilities that will enable this goal to be reached. To this end, we conducted an analysis of each of these capabilities in the Oisans area.
- 18 First, income, even though it cannot in itself be considered an indicator of development, must be included in the analysis. In Oisans, access to a good standard of living varies considerably, given the link between level of development and level of tourism activity within the region. Tourism has led to the creation of high incomes in the area as well as seasonal unskilled jobs. The “employment” capability measures the capability of the territory to provide jobs, but also to provide stable jobs, which is an important consideration in tourist areas. In Oisans, the types of employment are limited, with most job opportunities in the tourism sector. Stakeholders have a generally positive view of the job market in Oisans, pointing out that this sector provides jobs for people who want to live in the mountains. However, the big challenge concerns the seasonal nature of job offers. Where access to housing is concerned, it is important to consider the possible competition between tourist accommodation and housing for local residents. In Oisans, local players (especially those working in the social sector) agree that access to housing is difficult because of the limited number of homes available and the high price of land. The local economic fabric measures the capability of a territory to provide a dynamic economic environment for its inhabitants. In this respect, Oisans is seen as a dynamic area, where business sectors have developed alongside tourism. In the case of human capital, those surveyed agreed that the area did not have any specific skills. Finally, social capital is a contrasting aspect. The sector is well developed in ski resorts, where all the local stakeholders work together to sustain this sector, which helps to create other projects. However, links are more difficult to create in a larger territory, although there is now evidence that stronger links are being forged thanks to a desire to create innovative projects throughout the territory as a whole.
- 19 Generally speaking, Oisans seems to be a well-developed territory (according to the criteria described above) and tourism has and will continue to play a key role in its development. The stakeholders were in agreement on this point. However, the level of development varies throughout the area, and this concerns all capabilities. The division

between resorts and small municipalities (more specifically in terms of income and access to services) was widely stressed by elected representatives in these municipalities, but also social players and project managers. The question thus concerns how the renewal of tourism services can contribute to more harmonious development of the territory. Below we examine the virtuous circle of resources-tourism-capabilities.

Capabilities: social resources at the service of mountain tourism planning

- 20 Capabilities are what individuals are able to do, but they are also something that can be mobilised for the benefit of tourism development. In other words, it is necessary to determine how the creation of territorial capabilities resulting from tourism development in a territory can lead to the renewal of tourism services. Our aim here is to identify how the virtuous circle of tourism-resources-capabilities operates in the Oisans area.
- 21 In fact, for all the stakeholders, tourism is the main opportunity for development. This also means looking at new kinds of tourism that minimise social and environmental impacts, and also dealing with the problem of seasonality. From the perspective of sustainability, stakeholders have to diversify tourism services and propose new activities. The second development opportunity is cooperation, introducing projects that benefit the entire territory. This concerns not only tourism but also social and cultural projects. Thus, a careful examination was conducted, involving all the stakeholders in the territory, into the living conditions of seasonal workers. It is indeed all of the links created thanks to tourism that will enable tourism services to be renewed by creating new territorial resources. It was the need to develop new tourist activities in Oisans that led to the creation of the “route des savoir-faire”, enabling visitors to discover local crafts. This focus on local products is helping the area to become more specific in the services it offers. The “route des savoir-faire” has brought together all the stakeholders in the territory for the purpose of tourism: farmers, craftspeople, tourism partners, elected representatives. Unlike generic resources (*e.g.*, snow cover) that have always been used in the territory, the “route des savoir-faire” has enabled local people to build and capitalise on territorial resources, by promoting their heritage based on agriculture and crafts.
- 22 To achieve this, tourism has drawn on all the capabilities of the territory, that is to say the dynamics of collective action and the territory’s capability of responding to external dynamics (Mardsen, 1998). In Oisans, stakeholders stress the close cooperation present in the community in meeting the challenges of tourism. One local official stated that “for the territory to develop, we must create a network, seek cooperation from others. [...] It is for tourism that we must work together (translation)”. There must therefore be cooperation between stakeholders in different sectors. The fact that many agree that tourism in the territory should be improved and developed augurs well for developing projects together. This is also what has led to improvements in tourism services: a tourist board manager mentioned an “awareness that visitors are interested in discovering the entire territory and not just the ski resort or the village”. Local councillors in Oisans, in particular, pointed out that they work with all the stakeholders in the resorts, from ski lift operators to the fire department or the police. The aim is to encourage all stakeholders to work together toward a common objective of developing tourism in the

area. This has encouraged initiatives that will benefit everyone in the community, for example, the introduction of services to help people find a home or a job (creation of a public services information centre in 2011).

- 23 The necessary changes in tourism also help harmonise development throughout the territory. Small communities have taken up the initiative of developing new forms of tourism (such as trail running and new kinds of cycling activities) and of moving away from the seasonal nature of tourism in the area. While in the past cooperation has generally been between ski resorts and the other municipalities in the territory, local stakeholders are now working together to develop new tourism opportunities.
- 24 Local officials also talked about making more “sustainable” use of tourism resources, mentioning electric shuttle buses, snow-making equipment that uses positive energy systems, energy-plus homes, development of solar energy, reduced car use, and more generally the idea of a move towards “greener” resorts. Tourism is thus dependent on environmental conservation, especially in Oisans. As tourism has developed in the area, there has been an increasing awareness on the part of stakeholders about the importance of sustainable development. In fact, the challenges represented by tourism in Oisans and the link between the sustainability of this resource and protection of the environment has given stakeholders a particular perspective on the question. In future, special attention must be given to more sustainable development of the territory, with greater emphasis on environmental protection and the social aspects of tourism.
- 25 Territorial capabilities are an essential factor in the renewal of the tourism product in mountain areas. Mountain tourism, strongly linked to territory, changes the structure of this territory and thus has an impact on territorial capabilities. These capabilities will then help reveal and exploit location-specific territorial resources, thereby enabling tourism services to be renewed.

Conclusion

- 26 By applying the capability approach to our analysis of the link between tourism and the development of mountain territories we have been able to take a fresh look at questions concerning territory and territorial development. We have also been able to re-examine the importance of where people live and work in the process of acquiring individual freedoms and opportunities, but also to provide a framework for preparing collective action. In the case of Oisans, development of generic tourism has profoundly altered – maybe even shaped – the territory, and this has helped reveal Oisan’s territorial capabilities. These capabilities are the basis for developing the territorial capital of Oisans (Camagni, 2009).
- 27 In terms of public policy, these innovative capability approaches help identify the challenges to be met. They help identify the conditions needed upstream for tourism to have the role of lever for local development, and thus lead to better tourism planning. From a theoretical point of view, they provide a more global approach to territories, going beyond discipline-specific analyses.

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ABSTRACTS

Mass tourism in mountain resorts is facing a number of challenges: climate change, economic crises, increased competition and changing demand. In response to this situation, numerous resorts have embarked on tourism projects, mobilising stakeholders and resources with a view to renewing the tourism product and moving from mass tourism to a form that is more specific. This process is not straightforward, however, and it therefore becomes critical to analyze the conditions that govern the renewal of tourism services in mountain areas. We hypothesize that by using regional generic resources, tourism creates “territorial capabilities” that are then used to build and add value to territorial resources. Tourism, in turn, builds on the latter to adapt. This “virtuous circle” is analyzed in the Oisans region of the Alps. First, we show how tourism has shaped the region by creating conditions for the emergence of territorial capabilities, then we explain how these capabilities enable a renewal of tourism services. Results show that capabilities act as human and social resources for the territory, especially with respect to the development of mountain tourism projects.

INDEX

Keywords: mountain tourism, territorial resources, territorial capabilities, Alps

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